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Hard Times: Part 03

Charles Dickens

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The name of the public house was the Pegasus's Arms. The Pegasus's legs might have been more to the purpose; but, underneath the winged horse upon the sign-board, the Pegasus's Arms was inscribed in Roman letters. Beneath that inscription again, in a flowing scroll, the painter had touched off the lines:

Good malt makes good beer,
Walk in, and they'll draw it here,
Good wine makes good brandy.
Give us a call, and you'll find it handy.

Framed and glazed upon the wall behind the dingy little bar, was another Pegasus—a theatrical one—with real gauze let in for his wings, golden stars stuck on all over him, and his ethereal harness made of red silk.

As it had grown too dusky without, to see the sign, and as it had not grown light enough that was manifest to eye or ear in the Pegasus's Arms.

They heard the doors of rooms above, opening and shutting as Sissy went from one to another in quest of her father; and presently they heard voices expressing surprise. She came bounding down again in a great hurry, opened a battered and mangy old hair-trunk, found it empty, and looked round with her hands clasped and her face full of terror.

"Father must have gone down to the Booth, sir. I don't know why he should go there, but he must be there; I'll bring him in a minute!" She was gone directly, without her bonnet; with her long, dark, childish hair streaming behind her.

"What does she mean!" said Mr. Gradgrind. "Back in a minute? It's more than a mile off."

Before Mr. Bounderby could reply, a young man appeared at the door, and introducing himself with the words, "By your leaves, gentlemen!" walked in with his hands in his pockets. His face, close-shaven, thin, and sallow, was shaded by a great quantity of dark hair brushed into a roll all round his head, and parted up the centre. His legs were very robust, but shorter than legs of good proportions should have been. His chest and back were as much too broad, as his legs were too short. He was dressed in a Newmarket coat and tight-fitting trousers; wore a shawl round his neck; smelt of lamp-oil, straw, orange-peel, horses' provender, and sawdust; and looked a most remarkable sort of Centaur, compounded of the stable and the play-house. Where the one began, and the other ended, nobody could have told with any precision. This gentleman was mentioned in the bills of the day as Mr. E. W. B. Childers, so justly celebrated for his daring vaulting act as the Wild Huntsman of the North American Prairies; in which popular performance, a diminutive boy with an old face, who now accompanied him, assisted as his infant son: being carried upside down over his father's shoulder, by one foot, and held by the crown of his head, heels upwards, in the palm of his father's hand, according to the violent paternal manner in which wild huntsmen may be observed to fondle their offspring. Made up with curls and carmine,
this hopeful young person soared into so pleasing a Cupid as to constitute the chief delight of the maternal part of the spectators; but, in private, whose characteristics were a precocious cutaway coat and an extremely gruff voice, he became of the Turf, turfy.

"By your leaves, gentlemen," said Mr. E. W. B. Childers, glancing round the room. "It was you, I believe, that were wishing to see Jupe!"

"It was," said Mr. Gradgrind. "His daughter has gone to fetch him, but I can't wait; therefore, if you please, I will leave a message for him with you."

"You see, my friend," Mr. Bounderby put in, "we are the kind of people who know the value of time, and you are the kind of people who don't know the value of time."

"I have not," retorted Mr. Childers, after surveying him from head to foot, "the honor of knowing you;—but if you mean that you can make more money of your time than I can of mine, I should judge from your appearance, that you are about right."

"And when you have made it, you can keep it too, I should think," said Cupid.

"Kidderminster, stow that!" said Mr. Childers. (Master Kidderminster was Cupid’s mortal name).

"What does he come here cheeking us for, then?" cried Master Kidderminster, showing a very irascible temperament. "If you want to check us, pay your ochre at the doors and take it out."

"Kidderminster," said Mr. Childers, raising his voice, "stow that!—Sir," to Mr. Gradgrind, "I was addressing myself to you. You may or you may not be aware (for perhaps you have not been much in the audience), that Jupe has missed his tip very often, lately.

"Has—what has he missed?" asked Mr. Childers.

"A speaker, if the gentleman likes it better," said Mr. Gradgrind, glancing at the potent Bounderby for assistance.

"Missed his tip."

"Offered at the Garters four times last night, and never done 'em once," said Master Kidderminster. "Missed his tip at the banners, too, and was loose in his ponging."

"Didn't do what he ought to do. Was short in his leaps and bad in his tumbling," Mr. Childers interpreted.

"Oh!" said Mr. Gradgrind, "that is tip, is it?"

"In a general way—that's missing his tip," Mr. E. W. B. Childers answered.

"Nine-oils, Merrylegs, missing tips, garters, banners, and Ponging, eh!" ejaculated Bounderby with his laugh of laughs. "Queer sort of company too, for a man who has raised himself."

"Let over yourself, then," retorted Cupid.

"Oh Lord! If you've raised yourself so high as all that comes to, let yourself down a bit."

"This is a very obtrusive lad!" said Mr. Gradgrind, turning, and knitting his brows on him.

"We've had a young gentleman to meet you, if we had known you were coming," retorted Master Childers, nothing abashed. "It's a pity you don't have a better speak, being so particular. You're on the Tight-Jeff, ain't you?"

"What does this unmannerly boy mean," asked Mr. Gradgrind, eyeing him in a sort of desperation, "by Tight-Jeff?"

"There! Get out, get out!" said Mr. Childers, thrusting his young friend from the room, rather in the prairie manner. "By Tight-Jeff or Slack-Jeff, it don't much signify; it's only tight-rope and slack rope. You were going to give me a message for Jupe?"

"Yes, I was."

"Then," continued Mr. Childers, quickly, "my opinion is, he will never receive it. Do you know much of him?"

"I never saw the man in my life."

"I doubt if you ever will see him now. It's pretty plain to me, he is off."

"Do you mean that he has deserted his daughter?"

"Ay! I mean," said Mr. Childers, with a nod, "that he has cut. He was here last night, he was goosed the night before last, he was goosed to-day. He has lately got in the way of being always goosed, and he can't stand it."

"Why has he been—so very much—Goosed?" asked Mr. Gradgrind, forcing the word out of himself, with great solemnity and reluctance.

"His joints are turning stiff, and he is going to give me a message for Jupe—?"

"I have not," retorted Mr. Childers, after asking Mr. Gradgrind, forcing the word out of himself, with great solemnity and reluctance.

"What does this unmannerly boy mean," asked Mr. Gradgrind, eyeing him in a sort of desperation, "by Tight-Jeff?"

"This is good, Gradgrind! A man so fond of his daughter, that he runs away from her! This is devilish good! Ha! ha! Now, I'll tell you what, young man. I haven't always occupied my present station of life. I know what these things are. You may be astonished to hear it, but my mother ran away from me."

"Very well," said Bounderby. "I was born in a ditch, and my mother ran away from me. Do I excuse her for it? No. Have I ever excused her for it? Not I. What do I call her for it? I call her probably the very worst woman that ever lived in the world, except my drunken grandmother. There's no family pride about me, there's no imaginative sentimental humbug about me. I call a spade a spade; and I call the mother of Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, without any fear or
any favour, what I should call her if she had been the mother of Dick Jones of Wapping. So, with this man. He is a runaway rogue and a vagabond, that's what he is, in English."

"It's all the same to me what he is or what he is not, whether in English or whether in French," retorted Mr. E. W. B. Childers, facing about. "I am telling your friend what's the fact; if you don't like to hear it, you can avail yourself of the open air. You give it mouth enough, you do; but give it mouth in your own building at least," remonstrated E. W. B. with stern irony. "Don't give it mouth in this building, till you're called upon. You have got some building of your own, I dare say, now!"

"In perhaps so," replied Mr. Bounderby, rattling his money and laughing.

"Then give it mouth in your own building, will you, if you please?" said Childers.

"Because this isn't a strong building, and too much of you might bring it down!"

Eying Mr. Bounderby from head to foot again, she turned him as from a man finally disposed of, to Mr. Gradgrind.

"If sent his daughter out on an errand not an hour ago, and then was seen to slip out himself, with his hat over his eyes and a bundle tied up in a handkerchief under his arm. She will never believe it of him; but he has cut away and left her."

"Pray," said Mr. Gradgrind, "why will she never believe it of him?"

"Because those two were one. Because they were never asunder. Because, up to this time, he seemed to dote upon her," said Childers, taking a step or two to look into the empty trunk. Both Mr. Childers and Master Kidderminster walked in a curious manner; with their legs wider apart than the general run of men, and with a very knowing assumption of being stiff in the knees. This walk was common to all the male members of Sleary's company, and was understood to express, that they were always half cracked—and then considered her provided for. If you should happen to have looked in to-night, for the purpose of telling him that you were going to do her any little service," said Mr. Childers, stroking his face again, and repeating his look, "it would be very fortunate and well timed; very fortunate and well timed."

"On the contrary," returned Mr. Gradgrind. "I came to tell him that her connexions made her not an object for the school, and that she must not attend any more. Still, if her father really has left her, without any connivance on her part—Bounderby, let me have a word with you."

Upon this, Mr. Childers politely betook himself, with his equestrian walk, to the landing outside the door, and there stood stroking his face and softly whistling. While thus engaged, he overheard such phrases in Mr. Bounderby's voice, as "No, I say no; however, he had this move in his mind—he was always half cracked—and then considered her provided for. If you should happen to have looked in to-night, for the purpose of telling him that you were going to do her any little service," said Mr. Childers, stroking his face again, and repeating his look, "it would be very fortunate and well timed; very fortunate and well timed."

"On the contrary," returned Mr. Gradgrind. "I came to tell him that her connexions made her not an object for the school, and that she must not attend any more. Still, if her father really has left her, without any connivance on her part— Bounderby, let me have a word with you."

Meanwhile, the various members of Sleary's company gradually gathered together from the upper regions, where they were quartered, and, from standing about, talking in low voices to one another and to Mr. Childers, gradually insinuated themselves and him into the room. There were two or three handsome young women among them, with their two or three husbands, and their two or three mothers, and their eight or nine little children, who did the fairy business when required. The father of one of the families was in the habit of balancing the father of another of the families on the top of a great pole; the father of a third family often made a sketch of both those fathers, with Master Kidderminster for the apex, and himself for the base; all the fathers could dance upon rolling casks, stand upon bottles, catch knives and
balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing. All the mothers could (and did) dance, upon the slack wire and the tight rope, and perform rapid action bare-backed steeds; none of them were at all particular in respect of showing their legs; and one of them, alone in a Greek chariot, drove six in hand into every town they came to. They all assumed to be mighty rakish and knowing, they were not very tidy in their private dresses, they were not at all orderly in their domestic arrangements, and the combined literature of the whole company would have produced but a poor letter on any subject. Yet there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an unerring readiness to help and pity one another, deserving, often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction, as the every-day virtues of any class of people in the world.

Last of all appeared Mr. Sleary: a stout man as already mentioned, with one fixed eye and one loose eye, a voice (if it can be called so) like the efforts of a broken old pair of bellows, a flabby surface, and a muddled head which was never sober and never drunk.

"Thquire!" said Mr. Sleary, who was troubled with asthma, and whose breath came far too thick and heavy for the letter s, "Your thervant! Thith ith a bad piethe of bithmith, thith ith. You've heard of my Clown and hith dog being thuppothed to have morrithed?"

He addressed Mr. Gradgrind, who answered "Yes."

"Well Thquire," he returned, taking off his hat, and rubbing the lining with his pocket-handkerchief, which he kept inside it for the purpose, "Ith it your intentionth to do anything for the poor girl, Thquire?"

"I shall have something to propose to her when she comes back," said Mr. Gradgrind. "Glad to hear it, Thquire. Not that I want to have the child, any more than I want to thand in her way. I'm willing to to you, my opinion ith that you had better not want to get rid of the child, any more than I j "I tell you what, Thquire. Tothpeakplain haste, communicated the following hint, apart when she comes back," said Mr. Gradgrind.

"Thquire ! " said Mr. Sleary, who was impressed by the speaker's strong common sense, that instead of being impressed by the speaker's strong common sense, they took it in extraordinary dudgeon. The men muttered "Shame!" and Mr. Bounderby (growing impatient) took the case in hand.

"Now, good people all," said he, "this is wanton waste of time. Let the girl understand the fact. Let her take it from me, if you like, who have been run away from myself. Here, what's your name? Your father has absconded—deserted you—and you mustn't expect to see him again as long as you live."

They cared so little for plain Fact, these people, and were in that advanced state of degeneracy on the subject, that instead of being impressed by the speaker's strong common sense, they took it in extraordinary dudgeon. The men muttered "Shame!" and the women "Brute!" and Sleary, in some haste, communicated the following hint, apart to Mr. Bounderby.

"I tell you what, Thquire. To thpeaksplain to you, my opinion ith that you have cut it thort, and drop it. They're a very good natur'd people, my people, but they're accustomed to be quick in their movement; and if you don't act upon my advise, I'm damned if I don't believe they'll pitn y<
in consequence of there being practical ob-
jections, into which I need not enter, to the
reception there of the children of persons so
employed, am prepared in these altered cir-
cumstances to make a proposal. I am willing
to take charge of you, Jupe, and to educate
you, and provide for you. The only condition
(over and above your good behaviour) I make
is, that you decide now, at once, whether to
accompany me or remain here. Also, that if
you accompany me now, it is understood that
you communicate no more with any of your
friends, who are here present. These observ-
vations comprise the whole of the case."

"At the same time," said Sireay, "I
must put in my word, Thquire, the that both
thides of the banner may be equally theem.
If you like, Theithila, to be prenithich, you
know the natur of the work and you know
your companionth. Emma Gordon, in whethe
lap you're a lynn' at prethent, would be a
mother to you, and Jothiliphine would be a
thithicer to you. I don't pretend to be of the
angel breed myself, and I dont thay that good
tempered or bad tempered I never did a
horthe a injury yet, no more than thwearing at
him went, and that I don't expect I thall begin
therwith at my time of life, with a rider.
I never with meth of a Cacklther, Thquire, and
I have tied my thay." The latter part of this speech was addressed

The only observation I will make to you
Jupe, in the way of influencing your decision,
is, that it is highly desirable to have a sound
practical education, and that even your father
himself (from what I understand) appears,
known to have harboured matrimonial views,
part of the company yet, and every one of
them had to unfold his arms (for they all
assumed the professional attitude when they
found themselves near Sireay), and give her a
master manner of congratulating young ladies
on their dismounting from a rapid act; but
there was no rebound in Sissy, and she only
stood before him crying.

The whole company perceived the force of the change,
and drew a long breath together, that plainly
said, "she will go ! "

"Be sure you know your own mind, Jupe," said Mr. Gradgrind cautionned her; "I say no more.
Be sure you know your own mind!"

"When father comes back," cried the girl,
handhd her to Mr. Gradgrind as to a horse.

"There the ith, Thquire," he said, sweeping
his loose eye. "You're one of the thort,
Thquire, that keepth a prethious thight of
money out of the hounths. But never mind that
at prethent." There was another silence; and then she
exclaemned, sobbing with her hands before her
face, "Oh give me my clothes, give me
clothes, and let me go away before I break
my heart!"

The women sadly bestirred themselves to
get the clothes together—it was soon done,
for they were not many—and to pack them
in a basket which had often travelled with
them. Sissy sat all the time, upon the ground,
still sobbing and covering her eyes. Mr. Gradgrind and his friend Bounderby stood
near the door, ready to take her away. Mr.
Sireay stood in the middle of the room, with
the male members of the company about him,
and who moodily withdrew. Mr. Sireay was
reserved until the last. Opening his arms
wide he took her by both her hands, and would
have sprung her up and down, after the riding-
master manner of congratulating young ladies
on their dismounting from a rapid act; but
there was no rebound in Sissy, and she only
stood before him crying.

"Good bye, my dear!" said Sireay. "You'll
make your fortun, I hope, and none of our
poor foltkh will ever trouble you, I'll pound it.
I with your father hadn't taken hith dog with
him thithter to you. I don't pretend to be of the
angel breed myself, and I dont thay but
angel breed myself, and I dont thay but
mutter, tho ith ath broad ath thong long! "

With that, he regarded her attentively with
his fixed eye, surveyed his company with the
loose one, kissed her, shook his head, and
handed her to Mr. Gradgrind as to a horse.

"There the ith, Thquire," he said, swaping
her with a professional glance as if she were being adjusted in her seat, "and the'll do you juthite! Good bye Thethilia!"

"Good bye Cecilia!" "Good bye Sissy!"

"God bless you dear!" In a variety of voices from all the room.

But the riding-master eye had observed the bottle of the nine oils in her bosom, and he now interposed with "Leave the bottle, my dear; it large to carry; it will be of no uthe to you now. Give it to me!"

"No, no!" she said, in another burst of tears. "Oh no! Pray let me keep it for father till he comes back! He will want it, when he comes back. He had never thought of going away, when he sent me for it. I must keep it for him, if you please!"

"Tho be it, my dear. (You thee how it ith, Thquire!) Farewell, Thethilia! My latch worth to you ith thith, Thick to the termth of your engagement, be obedient to the Thquire, and forget ith. But if, when you're grown up and married and well off, you come upon any horthe-riding ever, don't be in a hurry to give the ith with it, give it a Bethepeak if you can, and think you might do utth. People mutht be amuthed, Thquire, thenhomeh," continued Sleary, rendered more pursey than ever, by so much talking; "they can't be alwayth a working, nor yet they can't be alwayth a learning. Make the betht of ith: not the wuthth. I've got my living out of the horthe-riding all my life, I know; but I con-thider that I lay down the philothophy of the thubject when I thay to you, Thquire, make the betht of ith: not the wuthth!"

The Sleary philosophy was propounded as they went down stairs; and the fixed eye of Philosophy—and its rolling eye, too—soon lost the three figures and the basket in the darkness of the street.

OUT IN THE DESERT.

There is no word which suggests more vague and horrible ideas than the Desert. We are prone, rather from the impressions left by classical writers and poets than from exact geographical study, to imagine it as a sea of sand, now stretching in level uniformity on every side to a circular horizon, now raised to one side, now to the other; not absolutely in a compact body; but occasionally in indefinite hollows in the plain were expanses* of valleys or in almost imperceptible hollows in the plain were expanses* of desert-traveling, especially when we know that however these perils may have been exaggerated, they have a real existence after all, that lives have been lost, that whole caravans have truly "foundered" in a sea of sand, and that every difficult traject is strewed with bones, not always of camels. Although, therefore, after some time spent in the Libyan waste, I had begun to look upon it as a very comfortable sort of place indeed—the chances of dying by thirst or heat, or fray's with robbers, not always suggesting themselves—yet, when I left a well announced as the last for four days, a slight feeling of awe seemed not inappropriate. Silence prevailed in the caravan for a time—all my companions being in the same mood of mind.

There are several sorts of caravans or Kafilas. Ours was composed simply of travelers; and it is worth while saying a word or two of its economy, in order that readers accustomed to a rather more expeditious mode of proceeding may be enabled to realise the slowness of our progress. We had with us nine camels to carry baggage, provisions, and water for nine men; whilst for "eques-trian" purposes we had six animals which we rather vulgarly designated Jerusalem ponies. The four travellers walked or rode, as they chose; their two servants generally walked; whilst the escort of three Bedouins shuffled along in their slippers or climbed up and sat between the water-skins or on the tent-gear. Our average rate of progress was two miles and a half per hour; for whatever was gained by pushing forward at a more rapid rate, was sure to be lost afterwards by idling on the way. When the country was absolutely arid we went steadily on in a compact body; but occasionally in the beds of valleys or in almost imperceptible hollows in the plain were expanses covered by a growth of dwarf plants with more weed than leaf, or even by spare thickets of rather lively green. The camels stretched down their long necks, now to one side, now to the other; not absolutely stopping but pausing to snatch mouthfuls, which they munched as they went. If they were denied the privilege, say the Bedouins, they would soon be exhausted and unable to

places, though small, and in this way only can we account for the fact, that as far as history or tradition takes us back, we hear of caravan routes crossing it in every direction, with regular stations and places of rendezvous. There are difficulties and dangers to be overcome certainly; but imagination is a great coward, and requires to be comforted by science. Wonderful was the story of the Simoon; but, although a recent traveller persuaded himself that he saw water boil beneath its influence, two-thirds of what we hear of it may be ranked with the marvels of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments.

Yet there is something fascinating in the way in which the Orientals tell of the perils of desert-traveling, especially when we know that however those perils may have been exaggerated, they have a real existence after all, that lives have been lost, that whole caravans have truly "foundered" in a sea of sand, and that every difficult traject is strewed with bones, not always of camels. Although, therefore, after some time spent in the Libyan waste, I had begun to look upon it as a very comfortable sort of place indeed—the chances of dying by thirst or heat, or fray's with robbers, not always suggesting themselves—yet, when I left a well announced as the last for four days, a slight feeling of awe seemed not inappropriate. Silence prevailed in the caravan for a time—all my companions being in the same mood of mind.

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